

whether the charges are appropriate. In many cases, a manager of the repair agent separates the billing repair cards according to the facility that performed the repairs. The manager then distributes the billing repair cards to field representatives at the various repair facilities for their comments. Once the manager receives comments from all of the field representatives, the manager makes a final decision to approve, disapprove, or partially approve each exception. The manager then sends these responses to the railcar owner. This process typically requires months to complete. Moreover, the shipping and handling associated with all of this correspondence is expensive for both the repair agent and the railcar owner. Accordingly, there is a need for a more efficient and less expensive method and system for tracking and processing billing exceptions.

It is, therefore, an object of the present invention to provide an improved method and system for efficiently tracking and verifying charges billed to a customer by a vendor. It is another object of the present invention to provide an improved method and system for efficiently tracking and verifying charges billed by a repair agent to an equipment owner, preferably in a manner that complies with the AAR Interchange Rules.

## BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

In accordance with the present invention, a method and system are described for verifying charges billed to a customer by a vendor.

According to one aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of verifying charges billed to a customer by a vendor. A set of billing data associated with the charges is loaded into a billing verification system that is accessible by both the customer and the vendor via a distributed computer network. The customer reviews the billing data via the billing verification system to identify billing exceptions associated with any disputed charges. A billing exception record is generated in the billing verification system for each of the billing exceptions. The vendor is then notified of the billing exceptions. The vendor reviews and responds to the billing exceptions

via the billing verification system. A billing exception response record is generated for each vendor response. The customer is then notified of the vendor response.

According to another aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of verifying repair charges billed to an equipment owner by a repair agent. A set of billing data associated with the repair charges is loaded into a billing verification system that is accessible by both the equipment owner and the repair agent via a distributed computer network. The equipment owner reviews the billing data via the billing verification system to identify billing exceptions associated with any disputed repair charges. A billing exception record is generated in the billing verification system for each of the billing exceptions. The repair agent is then notified of the billing exceptions. The repair agent reviews and responds to the billing exceptions via the billing verification system. A billing exception response record is generated for each repair agent response. The equipment owner is then notified of the repair agent responses.

According to another aspect of the present invention, a system is provided for verifying vendor charges billed to a customer. The system includes a billing verification database and means for loading a set of billing data associated with the charges into the database. A customer graphical user interface is in communication with the database and is operable to facilitate customer review of the billing data to identify a plurality of billing exceptions associated with a plurality of disputed charges and to generate a billing exception record in the database for each of the billing exceptions. A vendor graphical user interface is in communication with the database and is operable to facilitate vendor review of the billing exception records to generate a billing exception response record in the database for each of the reviewed billing records.

The invention, and its objects and advantages, will become more apparent in the detailed description of the preferred embodiment presented below.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The subsequent description of the preferred embodiments of the present invention refers to the attached drawings, wherein:

**FIG. 1** shows a block diagram depicting a billing verification system according to one presently preferred embodiment of the invention;

**FIG. 2** shows a block diagram depicting a billing verification system according to another presently preferred embodiment of the invention;

**FIG. 3** shows a flow diagram illustrating a method of verifying charges billed by a vendor to a customer according to another presently preferred embodiment of the invention;

**FIG. 4** shows a flow diagram illustrating, from an equipment owner's perspective, a method of verifying repair charges billed by a repair agent to the equipment owner according to another presently preferred embodiment of the present invention;

**FIG. 5** shows a railcar owner menu screen display from an equipment owner graphical user interface of a billing verification system according to another presently preferred embodiment of the invention;

**FIG. 6** shows a billing exception header screen display from the equipment owner graphical user interface;

**FIG. 7** shows a billing exception record screen display from the equipment owner graphical user interface;

**FIG. 8** shows an exception document attachment screen display from the equipment owner graphical user interface;

**FIG. 9** shows a flow diagram illustrating, from a repair agent's perspective, a method of verifying repair charges billed by the repair agent to an equipment owner according to another presently preferred embodiment of the present invention;

**FIG. 10** shows a repair agent menu screen display from a repair agent graphical user interface of a billing verification system according to another presently preferred embodiment of the invention;

**FIG. 11** shows a billing exception header screen display from the repair agent graphical user interface;